Student estrangement in higher education: identity formation and the struggle against stigma

Keywords

Estrangement, higher education, estranged students, widening participation, stigma

Introduction

While investigation on family estrangement is growing within the academic circles (Agllias 2015, 2016; Blake 2017; Authors), research regarding the interconnection between experiences of estrangement and higher education is still very limited. Existing literature is largely in the form of policy briefings and recommendations, in particular in relation to funding from UK bodies such as the Student Loans Company (SLC) and the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) (StandAlone 2015). Moreover, most research on estranged students has been carried out by Stand Alone, a charity whose core goal is to support estranged adults generally. As such, a deeper and wider understanding of estranged students' experiences is important in also foregrounding their voices and perspectives.

Here, we report on a qualitative study on the experiences of higher education students who are estranged from their family, investigating how estranged students develop a sense of identity in the context of their academic lives. The paper borrows from Goffman's work on stigma and identity management and Bourdieu's work on capitals to cast a critical perspective on research participants' accounts. The combination of Goffman's and Bourdieu's work makes an important theoretical contribution here as it allows for the conceptualisation of estranged students' access to or lack of resources (capitals) in relation to what Goffman calls a 'spoiled identity'. The scarcity of knowledge in this area impels us to hybridise different concepts as a form of achieving a greater depth of understanding (author 1, forthcoming) of the phenomenon at hand. The stigmatisation of estrangement is intrinsically connected to the logic of capitals that prevails in academia and which allows for forms of distinction and differentiation among

peers. This introduction is followed by a review of literature on estrangement and its connection to higher education, followed by an outline of the methodology underpinning the study and finally, a discussion of findings as informed by combining Goffman's concept of stigma and Bourdieu's understandings of capitals.

Estrangement in higher education

To understand estrangement it is necessary to recognise the role and importance placed upon 'family'. Family is usually defined as a group of people who have legal or biological connections to each other, transcending the amount of contact established between family members, and enduring even after death. Family connections, particularly those between parents and children are typically characterized by the idea of 'unconditional love' (Scharp and McLaren 2017). Such interpretation of family connections however conveys a stark binary where families who have ongoing, open and functional relationships are seen as the norm and where family bonds and relationships that have broken down are construed as 'unnatural' and 'in need of professional intervention' (Allen and Moore 2017, 287). Family estrangement, in this sense, is more often than not regarded as a form of deviance and interference in relation to both unquestioned assumptions and the cultural imagination that 'a family is forever' (Sharp 2017, 2). This is problematic in that such an approach casts estrangement as an anomaly that requires fixing. It also raises questions regarding one's identity and the sense of powerlessness that is implicit to the idea that family links are everlasting. A stigmatising effect can ensue through what Goffman names 'mixed contacts' –'the moment when stigmatised and normal are in the same situation' (1968, 23). In the context of this research, the situation is higher education where mixed contacts converge and interact and where family capitals are expected to be mobilised for competitive advantage (Bathmaker et al. 2013) In other words, even though

family estrangement is a more prevalent reality in contemporary society (Conti 2015), encountering such a reality in higher education brings up a series of challenges to students who fall outside *familiar* patterns of collective understanding (see Goffman 1968) concerning family membership. Estranged students risk the anticipated benefits that family relationships entail, especially capitals transference and accumulation (see Bourdieu, 1986), that enable students to occupy positions within the field of education.

Estrangement and widening participation – conflating categories?

Although there is a significant body of work on the experiences of non-traditional students, such as care-leavers (e.g. Cotton et al. 2014; Harrison 2007; Jackson et al. 2005), estranged students have received far less attention in terms of research and policymaking (Bland 2018). The literature on estrangement in higher education has been mostly concerned with entry-level access – but access is not the only hurdle estranged students need to overcome. Positioning students as 'non-traditional' can encourage a deficit perspective (Field and Morgan-Klien 2010) and labelling students as 'disadvantaged' may strengthen stereotypes (Smit 2012) rather than contest them. This 'othering' of students from non-traditional backgrounds may well encourage a sense of difference and stigma among students themselves. At stake here is how one's sense of self is constructed through this process of 'othering' that is enacted interpersonally and up close and likely to create uneasiness (Goffman 1964, 31) in the face of identity norms associated with higher education and to which family is imagined as a key support structure. Nonetheless, estrangement is not necessarily a visible category of stigma, but one that can become intrusive in light of the expectations that are placed on family when it comes to supporting students' educational trajectories, expectations that are materialised through the manifestation of essential capitals that estranged students often lack (Authors 2019).

While it is clear that steps have been made in helping higher education institutions identify and support estranged students, there is also a growing awareness that estranged students do not fit existing widening participation policies (e.g. Bland 2018; UCAS 2017). Definitions of estrangement are themselves rather restrictive and inflexible, often not showing an understanding of familial complexities. For example, the Office for students limits the status of estrangement in higher education to students between 18 and 24 years old and stipulates that estrangement means no communicative relationship with either living biological parent (ibid 2018). This is a very restricted definition of family which limits conceptualisation of estrangement, and places students as fitting within traditional 'student age' benchmarks, arguably conflicting with the general mission of widening participation policies.

Moreover, such definitions disregard the fact that there are different degrees of estrangement. Estrangement does not have to be permanent nor a total lack of contact with family members; it can be cyclical and involve on-again/off-again contact (Scharp and Hall 2017). It can be very difficult to prove estrangement status under such restrictive conditions, with imposed criteria working as mechanisms of stigmatization rather than support: 'proving' estrangement requires disclosure of private information. Such strict definitions and processes shape the identities of those who are formally associated with them.. So how do estranged students develop their social identity within academia? Research into estrangement can help 'untangle family myths from society' (Blake 2017 533) and it can also help develop new understandings regarding how estranged individuals position themselves within the spheres in which they move. We are particularly interested in exploring the experiences of estranged students within the context of higher education using their own accounts.

The stigmatisation of estrangement through a logic of capitals

Estrangement creates emotional and physical distance between family members and has wide implications for those who move away from the classic support structures that are associated with family, especially regarding social, emotional and economic support. There is an intrinsic connection between family and the types of capitals an individual possesses (Bourdieu 1985) and which are of key relevance in shaping individual transitions.

Bourdieu pinpoints the development of four types of capital or accumulated status: social (networks and relationships), economic (wealth and income), cultural (in its embodied, objectified, and institutionalised forms), and symbolic capital (this form is the culmination of the previous capitals' legitimisation).Once perceived and recognised as legitimate, capital translates into symbolic power, constructing a particular social order as common sense, proper and given: this translation involves misrecognising other social status and positions that do not fit with the prevalent, recognised orthodoxy (see Bourdieu 1979, 79).

This understanding is of particular relevance in considering the place of estranged students in higher education institutions, which, to a large extent, presuppose a series of normative practices associated with the role of the family as transmitter of capitals. For estranged students, however, the lack or fragility of social and economic capitals is arguably one of the key struggles they face when in academia (see Authors 2019). Thus, to inhabit a recognisable structure such as family becomes a crucial advantage in one's social position and identity formation whereas family estrangement is often a misrecognised category not only in education, but also in social life more generally. This is so because 'family' is idealised as a social universe of its own (Bourdieu 1996). The social value placed on family thus outclasses any other expressions of social relations and the understanding of family within education is likely to be encountered by estranged students 'as a form of objectivity in all other individuals' (ibid 21), in other words, family is a key form of symbolic capital that can be leveraged as a

form of power that estranged students do not have at their disposal, power that is made apparent through different types of support – economic, social, emotional.

Family membership provides an individual with a protected, privileged and advantageous place in society, in general, and in education, in particular. Students falling outside of such expectations are more likely to be misrecognised, in a Bourdieuian sense (see James 2017) within the structures of the academic field, in that they do not fit in with preconceived ideals concerning the role of the family in contemporary student life. This type of misattribution is further exacerbated by the expectation of capitals that students are expected to have at their disposal while at university. Such expectations can have stigmatising effects depending on the social situation estranged students find themselves in. Indeed, social stigma is context bound (Bos et al. 2013) and rooted in normative perspectives (Goffman 1968) that somehow work as a form of social legitimation and which in turn misrecognise alternative categorisations of social practice (Bourdieu 1984). The hidden and explicit value attributed to family, and the forms of capitals provided and continued, leaves estranged students at a disadvantage (see Authors 2019). Moreover, disclosing estrangement is likely to lead to the discrediting of students' social identities, conveying a deviancy from normative family membership. Information management thus becomes a key strategy in concealing or alleviating the effects of social stigma (Goffman 1968), which in the case of estranged students is likely to become apparent through the lack of capitals they have at their disposal (see Authors, 2019)

Important to the understanding of the interrelationship of stigma and identity from Goffman's perspective (1968) is thus also the idea that there are two types of social identity: virtual and actual social identity. The actual social identity refers to who an individual really is and identifies with, whereas a virtual identity is concerned with how an individual is regarded and imagined by others. To clarify this perspective, it is important to note that family

membership is still often regarded as the 'bedrock' of social and economic capitals, and acts as an essential resource within education . For 'traditional' students, social capital can become an implicit advantage associated with family ties, and many have evidenced the operation of this in middle-class students' experiences. Family estrangement can be – and often is –marked by a lack or loss of economic capital as disconnection usually means leaving behind the resources made available to and by families. In the context of students entering higher education, the lack of social and economic capitals can have profound implications on their experiences – for example, in affording accommodation and basic goods (Bland, 2018) as well as fitting in with expected patterns of social practice inherent to academic life (Authors 2019). Research is starting to highlight that estrangement, may be a necessary response to an unhealthy situation (Agilias 2011; Scharp and McLaren 2017), but that is not to minimise the threat to inherited capitals and general material and subjective effects, including its implications on identity formation.

In this vein, this paper aims to start addressing the evident lack of research on the experiences of estranged students. It was with this in mind that we set out to explore the experiences of estranged students and, for the purpose of this paper, we will particularly focus on how estranged students situate themselves within academia. The following sections detail the study conducted and present the analysis regarding estranged students' own conceptions of the self, before a discussion of findings drawing on Goffman's (1968) conception of 'stigma' and pulling out students' struggles in accessing and maintaining essential capitals while studying in academia .

The study

The status of 'estrangement' is still recent in the UK. It was first introduced into student funding in 1997 in England, while this status was only recognised in Scotland in 2016, representing a

policy gap of almost 20 years.[1] This study is situated within the Scottish higher education system and took place in two Scottish Universities recruiting participants who identified with the status of estrangement. We drew on relevant contacts to disseminate the call for participation also advertised through relevant mailing lists (with the support of the widening participation teams) and posters were placed around university campuses. Participation in the research project relied on the proactivity of participants who took the first step to contact the researchers (Pittway et al. 2010). . Self-selection meant we were reliant on potential participants to contact: given that estrangement is a sensitive topic, we consider the voluntary interview-led recruitment process adopted for this project to have been the most suitable and ethical one.

A qualitative approach was deemed essential for this project given the lack of in-depth knowledge in the area. More concretely, a narrative inquiry approach was devised in order to collect data necessary to access the complexities of the topic under focus. Following the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) we understand narrative inquiry to be simultaneously an instrument and object of research in that such an approach offers an opportunity to explore, construct and re-construct research participants' narratives of experience through reflexive accounts of their academic lives. In this vein, a narrative interview guide was devised and interviews were conducted with 21 estranged higher education students studying at two Scottish universities. The table below provides some key characteristics regarding students' gender, age, type of University and degree[2].

[1] In April 2015, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act came into effect, establishing 'corporate parenting' responsibilities for Scottish institutions, including HEIs. See https://www.saas.gov.uk/_forms/corporate_parenting_plan.pdf

[2] For the purpose of this research we have the research sites have been distinguished by the type of institution. This is important in the context of the UK who features different types of institutions. For example, Russel Group institutions are the leading institutions in the UK whereas Technological Universities are research-intensive institutions outside of the UK HE elite group. Thus both type of institutions are likely to attract different 'types' of students.

Table 1 - Some characteristics of the research participant population

Narrative inquiry was used for this research project as a means of accessing the social, cultural and economic experiences of estranged students relevant to our project. In the first instance, we took inspiration from Bourdieu's theory of practice (especially the interplay of capitals and habitus) and devised a research interview guide able to capture and question the social, cultural, economic and symbolic contexts of participants' experiences. These experiences were often conveyed by accounts of capital scarcity, especially through lack of monetary resources and social contacts as evidenced below through participants' own accounts. Yet, as explored in the following sections, participants' narratives have also taken us into areas not previously explored by research on estranged students, especially participants' conceptions of their own status of estrangement and how they situate themselves as estranged students.. In doing so, the data will be analysed and discussed with the help of Bourdieu's concepts of capitals to situate participants' negotiation of resources as a key struggle in their experiences of academia, and extended by Goffman's theory of stigma to illustrate the impact of estrangement on one's social identity.

A vital aim of this research is that of encouraging new ways of thinking about and supporting estrangement in the context of education. More concretely, the interview guide was designed to: 1) access participants' own understandings of their own experiences in HE; 2) examine the values, attitudes and expectations they have in relation to higher education; and 3) explore their practices and relationships in and with higher education. For the purpose of this paper, we will be drawing on participants' accounts of their identity and how they position themselves within the field of academia.

The design of the narrative interview guide took into account different methodological requirements. To start with, researchers have approached reflexivity as an essential component

of the study of social practice (Wacquant and Bourdieu 1992, 36), evoking participants' capacity to analyse their own practice and denoting researchers' place in the research setting (Author2 2005, 2008). Narrative inquiry brings attention to the participant as both actor and first interpreter of the experiences narrated (Atkinson, 1998) and researchers as occupying a place: as a team we encompassed researchers across the early-established 'career course' (Author2), differently involved in widening participation initiatives and research projects (Author1 2018).

Our approach to facilitating participant voice was extended to an additional data collection technique in which participants were invited to write down one 'take home message' on a postcard. The messages could be addressed to other estranged students, the university, or the widening participation team, with most messages showing support and encouragement for other estranged students, one reading simply, "Keep on going. Don't give up", and another "It will be okay. Just hang on in there" (see Author2, 2018).

For the analysis of the research data, we adopted a thematic approach within an interpretive stance. This allowed us to familiarise ourselves with the data and explore patterns, consistencies and contradictions across the different interviews. The findings and discussion of the data collected are presented below..

Research findings

We aim to uncover aspects related to how estranged students conceive of their identity within the space of academia, and two key findings will be explored. One issue that came across very strongly concerns the idea that estrangement, as a label, conceals a stigmatizing meaning with which students prefer not to be associated. In fact, our participants agreed that the label of 'estrangement' does not reflect who they are, and most importantly, who they are striving to become, despite the difficulties of being distanced from their family. There is a clear preference

to describe their experiences through the notion of 'being independent'. Participants do not tend to frame their social identity in terms of estrangement. Estrangement is rather just an aspect of their lives that they have come to accept or conceive as 'as much as possible as their 'normal', but which in the context of higher education can be categorised by what Goffman (1964) describes 'normal deviant' (157): participants' 'deviant' situations of estrangement are considered in relation to a recognised 'normal' framework in which family is central (and of which access to capitals becomes a key indicator)... Below, the research findings are analysed and discussed, drawing on direct quotes from the interviews.

Estrangement as a heavy label to carry

One of the aspect that came across very clearly in participants' narratives is the idea that estrangement is a very heavy label to carry, one that is not always understood or even considered by other people, especially their university peers. As such, estrangement can easily be regarded as a taboo topic because it is a practice that is not necessarily associated with other people's experiences:

> Estrangement feels very taboo… it's almost like having to out myself a lot of the time to people… people are more familiar with the idea that your parents are divorced or have died or whatever (Jennifer, 31).

The label of estrangement can easily be regarded negatively, as something that is deemed wrong or seen as a form of stigmatisation, with individuals feeling they are judged by the circumstances that mark their life experiences:

> I often use independent as [the term] I like to describe myself… which kind of hides a little bit the sort of negative undertones of the word. (Anna, 32)

> It [estrangement] seems negative that you're either cut off or cut yourself off from your family, and normally that comes

> with the attachment of "what have they done wrong for that to happen?" (Robert, 29)

> I don't really like to title myself estranged that much… it's Stigmatising (…) like no matter what bad things happen to me, you know, it's like a very bad beginning, bad upbringing, or everything, a lot of bad luck, but I'm coming through it**.** (John, 26)

'Estranged' is often rejected as the main form of describing themselves,. Their efforts to access university, despite the lack of family support, is in part a way of overcoming the life circumstances that have characterised their experiences until this point:

> It's [the label of estrangement] not going to define me forever. It's going to define me for another three years, and then ah if I get a … if I want to do a PhD it's going to be paid. If I find a job I'm going to be financially independent. I am already financially independent, but I'm going cope better. (Martin, 22)

Participants' accounts seem to indicate that the label of estrangement appears to matter, even as a dis-identification, and that although higher education may eventually help them release themselves from such characterisation, as 'independent', it still carries a significant weight nonetheless, a weight that becomes heavier through financial instability. Often interviewees wish to establish themselves in their new role as higher education students generally and not as estranged students specifically. The label of estrangement thus appears to be of little value to participants, other than potentially identifying them to funding schemes as a form of alleviating capital struggles:

> I'd say it's [the label] only helpful if we would get like financial support (Nathan, 27)

Participants were often keen to underscore 'now' and 'then', viewing university as a break from past and as path to 'independence' or a 'new life' not defined by familiar adversities and the stigmatised effects family estrangement imposes on them:

> [the term] independent student means it reflects what you are now instead of what already happened to them [you]. (…) It's like now I'm kind of emotionally and financially stable (Emma, 24)
>
> [I came to University] to get a new life (Nathan, 27)

In many participants' perspectives, what should define them now is how they have dealt and are dealing with the effects of estrangement, often seen as producing a desired 'independence'. Participants reflected further on this by stating that their estrangement from their families allowed them to develop a level of maturity that may be less evident in the way the experiences of traditional students are often imagined:

> You had to be a bit more pro-active and a bit more independent than say students that were coming from a more traditional sort of family background (Melissa, 28)

In short, many participants felt that the label of estrangement does not really encapsulate who they are, and especially who they have, or will, become. More specifically, the term estrangement does not recognise their achievements, which were closely linked with their being at university, as illustrated by the quote example:

> I'm at a good point [in my life] actually where I'm quite happy that it [estrangement] happened to me because I've really developed in a way that I don't think would've happened if…, because I'm from like a council estate. (Melissa, 28)

It was thus clear that for the majority of participants the label of estrangement carried an unconstructive and unhelpful meaning with which they would rather not be associated. This

rejection of the label of estrangement suggests that students do not want to be viewed solely from the prism of their life situation and/or family life (or lack of it), but rather by what they have achieved. In participants' perspectives becoming and being a university student has had a transformative effect in their lives in that it has allowed them to redefine who they are, independently of their family situation. This approach implies more than an 'information management' tactic (Goffman, 1963) in that participants find in their role as university students a new identity that allows them – at least, to a certain extent - to reject the stigma of estrangement. This approach is more than a strategic form of protection from normative judgments; it is also a form of re-affirmation of who they have become through their own efforts. Associated with it is an expectation that universities, and society in general, would respond to them as meritocratic achieving individuals, instead of recasting them as family members, bound and buffered by familial capitals (Bourdieu, 1996). , The question of whether participants' university entrance can annihilate the stigma associated with estrangement is far more complex given ongoing inequalities beyond entry-point. This aspect is further explored in detail in the theme below, where participants reflect upon developing a strong sense of independence as a result of their experiences of estrangement.

A sense of independence

Investment in a strong sense of independence was articulated often and as a better, more credible, way to characterise their higher educational experiences:

> I think the terminology estranged, it, it does, it seems to have a negative connotation to me. (…) Um I always prefer the term independent student (James, 24)

> I think estranged kind of … some people see it as a negative thing. Whereas an independent mature student, it kind of fits the bill a little bit better because (…)it shows that you are fully

> independent, however not in a negative way, as the word estrangement sometimes feels. (Melissa, 28)

The term independent also held positive connotations in which feelings of pride, rather than shame or embarrassment, were expressed:

> I think of myself more as an independent person, and I think being an estranged student I'm like quite proud of the fact that I've still come back to university, but I have this title. I don't think it's kind of (….)my only identity (Kate, 24)

> [Being estranged] I guess it makes me more independent, because I feel like I need to be really concerned about what do I do with my time (…) I'm kind of thankful of the experience. Because it makes me more mature than the others. I'm not complaining. I'm just taking it like the positive way (…) once I finish my study my only responsibility is just to work hard, and I experienced that so it's not going to be something new for me. (Emma, 24)

The observation that participants felt a great sense of independence in higher education, is an aspect that has hardly been discussed in the literature of estrangement, as it prioritises a discourse of risk, hardship and family disconnectedness (Blake 2017). Even though participants did report the difficulties that were associated with the experience of estrangement – especially regarding financial concerns and lack of a safety social net as essential capitals supporting their educational experiences – a parallel narrative of independence became equally prominent in the interviews (Authors 2019). Participants encouragingly reported their endeavours to build a new life, closely related to university as a means of building their future. Their articulations seem to convey a more complex narrative than that that the term 'estrangement' is able to encompass at first glance. That is, estrangement works for participants as a point of departure for the development of other important identities that, for them, are more relevant in expressing who they are and how they intend to occupy their role in higher

education. In the case of this research, this is manifested by participants' enrolment and permanence in academia, even as this process is often associated with family support.

, It would be unfair to claim that students with estranged status do not require support. Students did report difficulties, but they also spoke about the importance of facing up to these same difficulties. There is therefore no doubt that students' feelings of independence derive from practices that develop out of a struggle to not only adapt to, but also, and above all, transform their life circumstances. Their resourcefulness stems from their wish to change their lives through the acquisition of higher education qualifications. It is in this vein that participants account for and address hardship experiences with resourcefulness and practical approaches.

Such accounts allow us us to cast a critical eye on the issues that not only afflict but also drive estranged students' practices. This observation is also established by some of participants' accounts as they stated that although family estrangement is in fact a reality in their lives, it is not one that they feel determines or controls their experiences:

> I just get used to, you know, life is like this, in my case … I mean I don't pay too much attention to that [label of estrangement] (…) It's no time to cry over yourself. (Erica, 24)

> [being an] independent student means it reflects what you are now instead of what happened (Emma, 24).

Many participants are focused on 'getting on' with their life. This was a sentiment expressed by other participants who accept estrangement as a normal aspect of their lives:

> For myself personally [the label] I don't mind it. I don't know whether others might think of it as like a sensitive subject, but for me it's just, just the way my life is. (Kate, 24)

> I don't think it's [estrangement] part of my identity. It's just like a thing that happened. (Emma, 24)

Such accounts describe a relationship with estrangement that does not come from a place of feeling out of place, but rather from a perspective where estrangement has become normalised as a way of individuals getting on with their lives. Yet, university life can disrupt such perceptions through the way higher education students are imagined as a uniformed cohort of individuals. This often implies an understanding of the higher education student as a supported family member who benefits from familial practices and capitals. The underlining assumption here is that higher education students belong to a middle-class sphere where capitals are at the disposal of individuals to harmoniously aid them in their academic success. Widening participation research has emphasized that in entering higher education institutions students should not be assumed to be homogenous and should be viewed through a prism of diversity and intersecting issues. The same applies to estranged students who do not enter the higher education space solely through a problematic of family difference or distance, and carry with them different intersecting social identities and positionings. Still, they are often at odds with engrained perceptions of student life, including the lack of key capitals that ultimately leads to a stigmatized understanding of their position in higher education. In the next section we will discuss the findings analysed.

Discussion

Our research shows how higher education students who have the status of 'estranged' understand this label as part of their social identity. It was clear from the narratives collected that students did not always regard such a label to be helpful to them. Rather, many participants disapproved of, and some rejected, the label because, in their perspective, it conceals a pejorative meaning, with some participants stating that the categorisation of a higher education student as estranged can be regarded as a form of stigmatisation that does not take into account

the reality they are constructing for themselves through their efforts to enter and prevail in academia.

'Stigma' as a construct to establish the position of individuals within a given social world can be conceived as a 'disqualification' from full social acceptance (Goffman 1968, 9). 'Social information' can circulate to discredit the individual in question when in the presence of others (ibid, 13). Estrangement as an element of one's identity distinguishes an individual as having an atypical relationship with their families. In other words, the label of estrangement gauges those associated with it as a 'stranger' in relation to what is considered the norm or 'normal', in this specific case the connection of university students with their families. This form of relational distinction (see Swartz 1998, 153) however does not translate into a form of recognition in that it does not materialise into symbolic power (Bourdieu 1979). On the contrary, it disrupts the social imagination of higher education students given the complexities that surround estranged students' identities and which inevitably challenge engrained perceptions that university experience can be an equaliser of opportunities and/or identity affirmation.

The label of 'estrangement' exposes an image of interviewees that does not fully account for who they feel they are or have become, irrespective of their lack of family ties. Their current material conditions of existence, reflected by limited key capitals, often gives away their family situation or lack of it. Yet, in their perspective, it says very little about who they have become as it does not reflect their self-defined position as students standing on their own, or in their own words, as 'independent students'. In essence, the label of estrangement can be regarded as stigmatising in that stigma is the inconsistency between two types of social identity (virtual and actual) that are established through the 'relationship between attribute and stereotype' (Goffman 1968, 14). In the case of this study the attribute of estrangement and the stereotype of family are at odds. Such dissonance leads to judgements of difference in relation

to what is considered normal or typical. It is this precise aspect that research participants take issue with in that as students studying in higher education they do not conceive of their family estrangement as something that should necessarily or wholly weigh in or characterise them within the academic context. Yet, when estrangement becomes an official form of student status or recognition in the academic setting a perception of difference is inevitably enacted, without necessarily becoming visible. Difference, in this case, does not denote positive uniqueness but instead connotes a spoiled identity.

According to Goffman the experience of stigma varies in accordance with the degree of visibility of an individual's stigmatised attribute or the degree of knowledge others have of it. He goes on to distinguish between individuals who he characterises as 'discredited', i.e., whose stigma is known or perceptible, and individuals who he describes as 'discreditable'. i.e., whose stigma is not known or visible (1968, 57). From this perspective, student estrangement could be described as a 'discreditable' form of stigma in that it is not an obvious or visible feature of our research participants.. On most occasions it is rather a concealed aspect of their lives, requiring disclosure for recognition and resources. Disclosure comes with the differentiated status of 'estranged', as more visible known, or in Goffman's perspective, increasing participants' chances of being discredited for lacking family attributes that are consistent with the experiences of the dominant student population. More concretely, in the context of our research the label of estrangement can serve to explain and socially position an individual holder of such label (Mallman and Lee 2016, 687) even if involuntarily. Thus, it is not surprising that research participants may want to resist and even reject the identification of 'estranged' and provide an alternative categorisation to their social identity, that of the 'independent' student, as they recognise that stigmatised identities can provide additional challenges to their already problematic integration in university life.

In this regard, 'discredited' individuals tend to devise ways to protect their identity and status within the spaces they co-exist. In the case of our research, participants define themselves as 'being independent' not only as a way of overcoming the institutionally imposed stigma they have been submitted to in exchange for financial support, but also as a way of asserting their identity through the traits they think makes for a more accurate presentation of the self. Underlining this approach is an expectation that the university, and society in general, act in a meritocratic fashion, recognising participants' efforts of getting into and on at University, despite all the difficulties they face Yet, they are faced with conventional structures that while do not aim to deter participants from achieving their objectives, do impose some hidden obstacles where family support is expected.

From this perspective, the status of estrangement can be regarded as a policy misconception that in the context of academia has tried to 'normalise' estrangement through a general widening participation approach. However, a close observation on the issue shows that such approach does not match the expectations or needs of students who are disconnected from their families. Rather it seems to increase the sense of strangeness and idiosyncrasy that characterises their social experience (Author2. 2018). What is more, this effort to 'normalise' estrangement is often not done so in a constructive way that would sensitise individuals interacting with estranged students to disjunctures between HE and family life as a more common phenomenon than many seem to imagine.

Students' characterisation of their own position and identity as 'independent' shows that they aspire to achieve a status that is detached from their family situation, one that is capable of recognising their own actions and efforts independently of the resources that are available to them. Being a university student is in part a key component in the construction of such social identity and social positioning; a form of freeing themselves from such labelling. However, support structures may involuntarily betray these goals when the complexities

surrounding the identities of such students are not taken into account by the policies that drive such support practices. This is not to suggest that support should not be provided, but rather that how such students self-position within education should be taken into account as part of that support. Taking the findings of this research seriously implies the reassessment of how such students are characterised so that a more suitable understanding of the needs of this group is achieved. More concretely, our research brings the issue of estranged students' social identity to the fore, in that the terminology adopted does not always reflect nor convey an appropriate image of their sense of self and instead can further stigmatise it. This in part responds to the lack of research in this area, and in part demonstrates the need to bring policy and research together to change practice whilst taking into account student voice.

Concluding thoughts

In western societies, ideologies about family still tend to emphasise an unbreakable bond, making any other type or lack of family relationship a-typical. This conception is currently no different in the context of Scottish Universities, where similar to the rest of the UK, students who do not have the backing of their family are given the status of 'estranged'. Although well intentioned, these supporting structures only partially cater for the needs of estranged students who are often considered from the perspective and experience of traditional students. Estranged students' identities and selves are not homogeneous, nor likely to be solely carved out of refusal/negotiation of stigma. In this vein, more research is needed to explore additional lenses that will not only provide further understandings, but also peel off some of the hidden layers of a complex reality that practice and policy may take at face value.

At the moment policies on estrangement do very little when it comes to consider the sense and development of individuals' identity formation. Even though financial support is indeed a key

issue for estranged students, their experiences are not only marked by the lack of physical resources. What is also important to consider here is how structural and subjective experiences intersect given that, according to participants' accounts, perceptions of stigma are always negotiated in the structured field that is academia. These perceptions are formed in relation to normative assumptions society has of both higher education and family life. This is why Bourdieu's conceptions of capitals and Goffman's understandings of (spoiled) identities provide us with a useful lens when examining this phenomenon. Participants' depleted access to capitals, especially in its economic and social forms, can, and often hint, at their family situation, or lack of it. In turn, such information ensues a 'virtual identity' of how others perceive them for not fitting with expected categories of university students. Participants' position here is however not only a Goffmanian one of merely managing such information as a form of creating a credible identity, but also of rejecting estrangement as a key trait weighing on how their identity is interpreted. They would rather be 'judged' by their achievements of entering and existing in higher education despite the practical and symbolic struggles of doing so. Such meritocratic ambition is however hard to fulfil within the core of an institutional field that continues to reproduce a conventional logic of social practice, despite the efforts to diversify its target population.

As universities claim readiness to welcome a diverse student body, there is a pressing need to acknowledge and rethink the complexity of students' academic lives through an approach that does not discriminate, even indirectly, against those do not fit within a regular or expected pattern of what it means to be a university student. Rather, widening participation agendas, including those now extended to 'estranged students', should recognise the changing nature of university life through a more inclusive, holistic approach: one that includes an informed understanding of how students self-position and how their identity and academic status can be enabled and developed. Inclusion of estranged students does not stop at entry

point and to measure entry as success would mean to ignore the challenges students bring and carry with them throughout their studies, and indeed beyond. This is particularly true for estranged students whose lack of family support is taken into financial consideration, but not from a more general perspective that would account for their sense of identity.

Further research is also needed in exploring estrangement from an intersectional perspective. Little is known about estranged students in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality, indicative of a wider knowledge gap that requires attention (see Authors, 2019) where estranged students' identities can hardly be known or concluded from one single research lens. In the case of the arguments herein presented, the concept of 'stigma' illuminates some of the issues estranged students face when entering the normative space of higher education. It also shows the need to hybridize theories to arrive at more complex understanding of the issues that afflict participants' experiences. It is in this sense that Bourdieu's and Goffman's work converge in this research. The effort of bringing these theorists together aims to evidence that estrangement should be regarded beyond shortage of capitals while aware that such shortfall of resources have a determining effect on how they are perceived, i.e., their virtual social identity, and which participants feel it strongly contrasts with their 'actual social identity'. Such approach, more than a technique of neutralisation of stigma, is an appeal to the recognition of how participants managed to transform their lives through their association with the university as a meritocratic field. Such a meritocratic goal however remains unrealised given the prevalence of conventional, symbolic structures within and perpetuated by higher educational contexts.

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